



The Concept of “Soul” in the *Jesuit Relations* : were there any Philosophers among the North American Indians ?

Michael Pomedli

Volume 41, numéro 1, février 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400138ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/400138ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Pomedli, M. (1985). The Concept of “Soul” in the *Jesuit Relations* : were there any Philosophers among the North American Indians ? *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 41(1), 57–64. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400138ar>

THE CONCEPT OF « SOUL » IN THE JESUIT RELATIONS: WHERE THERE ANY PHILOSOPHERS AMONG THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS?

Michael POMEDLI

RÉSUMÉ. — Dans cet article, je tente de relater, de comprendre et de mettre en valeur la philosophie des Indiens d'Amérique du Nord au sujet de la conception de « l'âme » telle qu'on la découvre dans les Relations des Jésuites, 1610–1791.

SUMMARY. — In this paper I try to recount, understand and become engaged in the philosophy of the North American Indians on the conception of the « soul » as found in The Jesuit Relations, 1610–1791.

INTRODUCTION

SOME PROBLEMS present themselves immediately. The Jesuits indicate that there was scarcely any philosophy or philosophizing present among the natives. The natives, the Jesuits noted, embodied an almost exclusively experiential approach to life. A parallel might be Kosuke Koyama's account in *Waterbuffalo Theology*². Koyama uses his own imagery in his sermons to Thais who spend most of their time with waterbuffaloes in the rice fields. Can such an experiential, waterbuffalo or peace-pipe approach qualify as « philosophy »? The Jesuit missionary, Paul Le Jeune, thinks not. He notes that if the Hurons did any philosophy it was with their feet and not

1. *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries in New France, ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites, New York: Pageant, 1959. Future references are by volume and page. Although the explorer and trader were the first Europeans in New France, they were seldom great letter writers. The letter writers par excellence were the Jesuit missionaries. In fact, letter writing was for them a religious duty! Annually, they sent a written report of their activities to their superior in Quebec or Montreal. The superior, in turn, edited a narrative (*relation*) of the most important events in the various missionary districts and forwarded these to his provincial superior in France. These narratives were then published as *The Jesuit Relations*. See 1: 37–38.

2. New York: Maryknoll, 1974.

with their heads (8: 271 ; 10: 147)! Did they do any « head » philosophizing at all in their considerations of the soul?

A second problem is epistemological and hermeneutical. How could the Jesuits, schooled in European scholastic thought, understand and transmit the obviously different Indian culture? How could they not impose procrustean determinations? The concept, « soul », for instance, is in 17th century philosophical and theological circles quite refined and specialized. To what extent do European concepts of soul reflect the natives' oral cultural sphere? Are the Jesuits' literal and the Indians' oral spheres of culture mutually exclusive? If they are not, how can we interpret/adapt one sphere into another? Also, did the Jesuit reporters in New France and the revisers and adapters in Old France employ a style and content of writing that would satisfy primarily European curiosities?

While recognizing the importance of the second problem, the epistemological and hermeneutical, I will focus primarily on the first, the more philosophical.

1. *General Conceptions about Souls*

In defense of the Jesuits, the *Relations*, which are among the earliest documents we have of the native people, display genuine attempts to understand the natives' ways of life and language. Such an understanding did not come easily, for as they note, the Indians had a disturbing tendency to live with contradictions and failed to elucidate perplexities (10: 143). We might accuse them, nevertheless, of using their own cultural attainments as measuring sticks for native thought.

1.1. *Many names for the soul.* The very concept, « soul », might be considered a case of inaccurate measurement. Although the natives' nuanced names for soul did not correspond exactly with the European concept, there are similarities. Their names for the soul are:

1.1.1. One name, *khiondhecwi*, insofar as it merely animates the body and gives it life;

1.1.2. Another name, *oki andaerandi*, insofar as the soul possesses reason;

1.1.3. The soul as thinking and deliberating — *endionrra*;

1.1.4. The affective or desiring soul — *gonennoncwal*;

1.1.5. A kind of free-soul, *esken*, which is separated from the body at death but remains for some time;

1.1.6. The soul that remains with the body, with the bones, after the person has died (10: 141).

These different conceptions of the soul reflect the functions of the living person and his internal and external experiences.

1.2. *Other general characteristics of souls* include their divisibility and reasonableness (« raisonnable ») (10: 287), and their spirituality and immateriality (26: 125–127).

Another general characteristic falls under the western term « animism ». Le Jeune wrote of the Montagnais that they believed « all things... are endowed with souls » (6 : 175)³. There is a ranking of souls, however, a difference of the human soul from that of animals (26 : 125).

1.2.2. Materiality and immortality of the souls. Le Jeune does not give the natives any credit for any spiritual conception of the soul : « (Indians), never having heard of anything purely spiritual... they imagine the souls as shadows of animate objects... they represent the soul of man as a dark and sombre image, or as a shadow of the man himself » and attribute to it all the parts of the human body. In fact, they believe that the souls eat and drink (6 : 175) and have the same needs as bodies (8 : 23).

Again, it was disconcerting to the missionaries that the natives did not face the illogical consequences of the material conception of the soul, the Jesuits felt, even when the absurd consequences were pointed out. If souls continued to exist physically, Le Jeune argued, the world would soon be overpopulated (12 : 29, 31)! In addition, this very physical determination of souls led Le Jeune to judge that the Montagnais and Algonquins did not believe in souls at all (16 : 191).

2. *Origin of the Conception of Soul*

We have no immediate data about the way the native people in question in the *Relations* arrived at a conception of soul. From the scant material available, it is possible, however, to theorize about it. According to Edward Tylor⁴, natives' belief in the soul may be traced to two sources :

- 1) Observations of the difference between active individuals and the dead, seriously ill, or sleeping persons ;
- 2) Experiences during twilight states of various kinds.

In the first observation, the individual can conclude that there is some sort of life-consciousness principle present in the living and absent in the dead. In the second experience, the individual can conclude that the soul is a transient shadowy being, overflowing the being's rootedness in time and space.

3. *Duality of Souls*

The many general conceptions of souls seem to coalesce into two main views, that of the separable or free-soul, on the one hand, and that of the body or life-soul, on the other : « ... many think we have two souls, both of them being divisible and

3. Claude Allouez notes of the Ottawa Indians : « They believe, moreover, that the souls of the Departed govern the fishes in the Lake ; and thus, from the earliest times, they have held the immortality, and even the metempsychosis, of the souls of the dead fishes, believing that they pass into other fishes' bodies. Therefore they never throw their bones into the fire, for fear that they may offend these souls, so that they will cease to come into their nets » (50 : 289).

4. *Primitive Culture : Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, London : 1871, chapter XI, as noted in Ake HULTKRANTZ, *Conceptions of the Soul among North American Indians*, Stockholm : Caslon, 1953, 19.

material, and yet both reasonable; the one separates itself from the body at death, yet remains in the Cemetery until the feast of the Dead, — after which it either changes into a Turtledove, or, according to the most common belief, it goes away at once to the village of souls. The other is, as it were, bound to the body, and informs, so to speak, the corpse; it remains in the ditch of the dead after the feast, and never leaves it, unless one bears it again as a child» (10:287).

Let us examine the descriptors for each one of these souls:

3.1. *The body-soul*. The body-soul is perceptive (39:19). Humans have this soul in common with animals (42:51); «dogs, deer, fish and other animals have... immortal and reasonable souls» (8:121). For the Onondaga, the body-soul is the seat for violent emotions such as sadness and anger (42:51). While this soul has a localized existence in the bones, upon death at least, it may slip somewhat accidentally into the fetus of a pregnant woman who passes by (1:263).

The body-soul operates in connection with the body and its organs. It is active when the body is active or awake. Its existence is tenuous upon death.

3.2. *The free-soul*. The free-soul is rational and can achieve an independence from the body in several ways; in dreams; on the occasion of violent passions arising from the body soul; while displaying a leadership or erratic tendency; upon death.

Let us briefly examine how the free-soul achieves some measure of independence:

3.2.1. In dreams. Paul Ragueneau wrote of the Huron mission: «When, during sleep, we dream of something that is far away, they think the soul issues forth from the body and proceeds to the place where those objects are that are pictured to it during that time» (33:19).

3.2.2. On the occasion of violent passions arising from the body-soul. Violent passions such as acute sadness or anger can expel the rational soul from the body. A present is then made to restore the free-soul to the body again (42:51).

3.2.3. While displaying a leadership or erratic tendency. The free-soul has an erratic, an escapist tendency or the tendency to lead the body along. Le Jeune told the story of a woman who had been captured. Her soul escaped first and «she ran after it so as not to let it escape (by itself)» (11:117).

3.3.4. Upon death. At death the free-soul moves far away, going on foot (whose feet?), fording streams, etc. (6:177–179).

The free-soul displays a leadership role over the body, and over the body-soul. The free-soul is experienced expressly in twilight times, in dreams, when the body is in a passive state. It seems that a person's individuality can spill beyond the confines of his body, extending his range of «experiences»⁵.

The nature of the free-soul is disclosed through its desires which Ragueneau describes as «inborn (*desideria innata*) and concealed» (33:189). These «come from the depths of the soul not through any knowledge, but by means of a certain blind

5. See Lucien Levy-Bruhl's rather elusive notion of participation in *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1975, 79–80.

transporting of the soul to certain objects» (33:189). The free-soul makes these hidden desires known through dreams « which are its language » (33:189). « Accordingly, when these desires are accomplished, it is satisfied ; but, on the contrary, if it be not granted what it desires, it becomes angry, and not only does not give its body the good and the happiness that it wished to procure for it, but often it also revolts against the body, causing various diseases, and even death » (33:189).

The pre-eminence and power of the free-soul is evident here, a power to ensure a wholesome existence for the body-person and a power to destroy it. Health, then, is not just an external matter, ensuring proper nutrition, for example, but a discernment of the depths of the soul, an interpretation of the free-soul's desires disclosed through dream images.

4. *Spirituality, Immateriality of the Soul*

While James Buteux was giving religious instruction at Tadoussac on the immortality of the soul, a native person responded : « Why dost thou take the trouble of proving that to us ? One would be very foolish to doubt it. We see very well that our soul is different from that of a dog ; the latter can perceive nothing except through the eyes and ears, and knows nothing that does not come under its senses. But the soul of man knows many things that are not perceived by the senses ; and so it can act without the body, and without the senses. And if it can act without the body, it can exist without the body. Therefore, it is not material and consequently it is immortal » (26:125-127).

The Tadoussac Indian's reasoning is clear, at least in this heavily Aristotelian and syllogistic form ascribed to it by Buteux. In view of the physical characteristics of the soul noted above, however, we are hesitant to conclude from a person's immanent activity to the immortality of the soul. Some of the corporeal images of the soul can, nevertheless, be viewed as pointing in the direction of its gradual spiritualization. The movement toward some ethereal characteristics can be seen in the descriptions of the soul as a shadow, as a dark and sombre image, for instance. To push the spiritualization even further, immanent activities such as desiring, thinking, deliberating, and also engaging in free movement and having an invisible presence are ascribed to the soul.

Despite this movement to the soul's immortality and immateriality, the Jesuits confessed that they had « all the difficulty in the world » (10:141) in getting the natives to believe in the principle of the one soul. And even after the missionaries made repeated attempts at proselytizing and exposing their « false beliefs » (10:147), the natives often continued to believe as formerly (8:23). Natives were accused of being somewhat simpleminded in not looking for more profound causes and resolving contradictions (33:191).

Obviously, the Indians were not philosophers in the European sense. There is more here, however, than a mere listing of experiences related to the soul, as noted in the following instances : the manifestation of hidden desires through dreams ; the movement toward ethereal dimensions of the soul ; the positing and justification for the spirituality and immateriality of the soul.

5. *Understanding both the Materiality and Spirituality of the Souls*

Is it possible to understand the seeming contradiction that the soul is at one and the same time both material and spiritual?

Let us approach the material-spiritual juxtaposition of the soul from two perspectives: 1) The individual as living; 2) The individual as dead.

5.1. *How can we reconcile both the materiality and spirituality of both the body-soul and the free-soul when the individual is living?*

It is relatively easy to understand the role of the body-soul as a spiritual principle animating, forming, making actual and keeping the body in act. It is akin to the principle of formal causality in Fragment 42 from Aristotle's lost dialogue, *Eudemus*⁶. In *De anima*, Aristotle notes that «the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it» (412a19–21)⁷. The very nature of the soul is to inform and constitute a body. An existence separate from the body would be unnatural and impossible for the soul.

How are we to understand the materiality of the body-soul? Is it an «incoherent and general» (3:135) conception as the *Relations* alleges? In an experiential perspective, the exclusively material conception of the soul might be downplayed for the organism gives evidence of a dynamism. However, to the extent that one observes a living body one would still speak in material terms much as Hebrew thought encapsules both the corporeality of humans and the life substance in one term, *basar*⁸.

What can we make of the free-soul as both spiritual and material? The Indians' foot-loose and fancy-free conception of the free-soul does nothing to stabilize the conception of individuality. Individuality cannot be established by a soul that can roam about almost at will. What is the nature of this independent willing? What kind of unity and stability is possible with such a conception? Perhaps the North American Indian is trying to show the ideal and expansive reaches of the soul. Then, with Jamake Highwater in *The Primal Mind*⁹ we are able to answer the question, Where are we when we are thinking or dreaming? Is it also possible, with Teilhard de Chardin, to point to the unlimited dimensions of a more spiritualized view of human beings, in terms of a sixth sense, in terms of extra-sensory perception?¹⁰

6. 1482b36–38 as noted in Joseph OWENS, *A History of Ancient Western Philosophy*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959, 319. Here, as in the other Aristotelian *Dialogues*, a «Platonic» theory of soul has given rise to Werner Jaeger's developmental theory of Aristotle's thought. The theory in *Eudemus* is quite incompatible with the one proposed in Aristotle's *De anima*. See JAEGER, *Aristotle, Fundamentals of the History of his Development*, London: Oxford, 1934.

7. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, New York: Random, 1941. *De anima*, 2,1; 412a 27-28 and 412b 4–6.

8. J.A.T. ROBINSON, *The Body*, London: SCM, 1963, 13.

9. *The Primal Mind*, vision and reality in Indian America, New York: New American Library, 1981, 89.

10. Pierre TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *The Divine Milieu*, London: Collins, 1957, 143-144: «The innumerable partial worlds which envelop the diverse human monads press in upon him from all around. His task is to re-kindle his own ardour by contact with the ardour of all these foci, to make his own sap communicate with that circulating in the other cells, to receive or propagate movement and life for the common benefit, and to adapt himself to the common temperature and tension. To what power is it

Again, the kinship of the free-soul to another dimension of Aristotle's conception of the soul is apparent. In the *Eudemus*, he « is reported as teaching that life apart from the body is natural to souls, like health, while life in the body is unnatural, contrary to nature, like disease. »¹¹

We have in Aristotle, as in native thought, the tension of two conceptions of the soul, indeed of two or more souls¹². We have the soul as naturally separable from the body (the free-soul), and the soul as naturally (substantially) united to the body (the body-soul).

It might be a temptation to dismiss the retention of both the materiality and spirituality of the two souls as the fumbings of primitive pre-philosophical minds were it not for a kindred position in the First Philosopher! These cross-cultural depictions of the soul underscore the dual tendencies in each human being. While we might affirm ourselves, on the one hand, as integral, as one, in our actions and thoughts, we can experience, on the other hand, the primacy of either the corporeal or the intellectual¹³.

5.2. *Let us consider the dual souls from the perspective of the individual as dead.*

What is the status of the spiritual dimension of the body-soul in death? Is its actuality pared down so that the matter, the corpse, predominates, but the form has some power in the body's periphery, informing fetuses, for instance? Is the status of the spiritual dimension of the soul akin to the Hebrews' conception of *sheol*, the world of shadows, a vague preliminary abode of the dead and their nature?¹⁴ The natives maintain that the material dimension of the body-soul in death is localized in the corpse itself.

What is the spiritual dimension of the free-soul in death? Its commanding, independent and innate characteristics have been noted above.

What about the material dimension of the free-soul? Is this material dimension merely a way of speaking about the human reality, the soul, in a continued anthropomorphic and rather primitive way? Or does the spiritual dimension prevail awaiting some form of reincarnation while the soul maintains a shadowy connection with the body, a quasi-material affinity? Or is the free-soul really spiritual, and material only insofar as it tends toward a bodily existence, much as in Thomas Aquinas' conception of the soul after death, where its existence is not in accordance with its nature?¹⁵

reserved to burst asunder the envelope in which our individual microcosms tend jealously to isolate themselves and vegetate?»

11. Fragment 35, 1480b14-15, in Owens, 318-319.

12. *Basic Works, De anima*, 2,2; 413b24-27.

13. The portrayal of a material, free-soul reflects a penchant of primal people to move to the abstract and spiritual only gradually while still retaining and even emphasizing the concrete physical images. See Hultkrantz, 33. According to J. G. Frazer, this physical conception of the soul is common among primal people. *The Golden Bough*, London: Macmillan, 1949, 874.

14. See T. H. GASTER, « Abode of the Dead », *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, New York: Abingdon, 1962, 787-788.

15. *Basic Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton Pegis, New York: Random, 1945, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 89, a. 1.

We cannot answer conclusively for we do not have enough information. As we have already noted, while the free-soul is described in concrete imagery, there is a gradual movement toward and predominance of the spiritual dimension. As to the possibility of metempsychosis, we have not investigated that aspect in our paper. To propose a solution in terms of western European thought, that of Thomas Aquinas in this instance, seems to involve imposing a too speculative model on the thought available.

CONCLUSION

I conclude that the peace-pipe philosophy as penned in *The Jesuit Relations* is genuine philosophy, for the natives held a rather intricate and sophisticated conception of the soul. The Jesuits present the natives as doing more than recalling their experiences. Natives espouse views, some of which are contradictory for us, but which are food for thought both for themselves and for us and are unresolved by Aristotle himself!¹⁶ Indeed, natives thought not only with their feet but also with their heads!

Can we know enough about native thinking to give a fair representation and appraisal of it? To what extent do unrecorded myths and legends embody a greater depth and understanding of the soul? From reading the *Relations* alone, our procedure must be that of caution, and our conclusions tentative. But I think it is possible to move across cultural spheres, distinct as the native oral and the European literal are. The credibility for such a crossing are the facts that the missionaries made great efforts to understand native lifestyles and language, that they noted teachings quite opposed to their own, that they confessed that even after conversion to Catholicism, natives lapsed into former patterns of life. In the end, I think the Jesuits tried to let native views stand.

The difficulty in making cross-cultural interpretations might appear to be insuperable. If one is overly venturesome, however, the temptation might be to use one mold for all. Between the Scylla of impossibility and the Charybdis of dominance, the attitude of letting another view emerge without falsifying it is possible and commendable.

16. Was the « intellect that makes all things » and the « intellect that becomes all things » (*De anima*, 3,4; 429a 10f) in fact « separate » from the structure of the individual person (Averroes, Arts masters 13th century Paris) or an essential part of each person and, when « separated » in death from the matter of the body, existing in an unnatural way (Aquinas)?